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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a tool-and-result methodological approach to the practice and evaluation of an urban community development and gardening project with homeless youth. Over 9 months, at least 40 homeless children and teenagers were involved in the program, and approximately 15 were core participants. The paper critically examines the role of evaluation and assessment with a transient population and discusses how these methods helped to transform leaving into an opportunity to celebrate Public history. As young people engaged in community development and gardening, the collective history was documented through photographs, video, writings, drawings, and interviews. In this context, the documentation of the collective history served both as an artifact to leave behind and memorabilia to take forward. As youth and adults created the tools of the evaluation simultaneously with the project, the evaluation tools became part of the result. The paper addresses the conceptual and theoretical framework of tool-and-result methodology, its challenge to Western scientific frameworks, and its effectiveness for transforming environments of learning and development and empowering those who transform them. (Author/SLD)

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Documenting Our Collective History:
A tool-and-result methodology for evaluation

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association, Orlando, Florida (November, 1995).

This paper describes a tool-and-result methodological approach to the practice and evaluation of an urban community development and gardening project with homeless youth. It critically examines the role of evaluation and assessment with a transient population and discusses how our methods helped to transform leaving into an opportunity to celebrate our history. As young people engaged in community development and gardening, our collective history was documented through photographs, video, writings, drawings, and interviews. In this context, the documentation of our history served as both an artifact to leave behind and memorabilia to take forward. As youth and adults created the tools of the evaluation simultaneously with the project, the evaluation tools became part of the result. The paper will address the conceptual and theoretical framework of tool-and-result methodology, its challenge to western scientific frameworks, and its impact for transforming environments of learning and development and empowering those who transform them.

Who's Vygotsky and what does he know about tools?

According to western paradigm, tools (language, symbols, etc.) are often used to achieve individualistic and mentalistic results (Newman & Holzman, 1993). Alienated from the tool-making process, we have come to see tools as means to an end, and the results of tool use as the products worth assessing, evaluating, and researching. The bifurcation of tools and results is perhaps clearest in educational settings. Separate is assessment from instruction, theory from practice, subject from object. Teachers use assessment tools, for instance, to measure individual student achievements. However, to the extent that teachers and students remain the users of tools, rather than the creators of them, they are alienated from themselves as producers of culture and history. They can only re-produce what is expected of them rather than be producers of

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learning and their learning environment. Separated from the historical process of production humans give up what it means to be truly human; that is, to be creators (Friere, 1970).

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, proposed a scientific methodology that challenges western science's dualistic separation between tools and their results. To Vygotsky, like his predecessor Friedrich Engels, the tool specifically symbolizes *human activity*. Tools impact human development not only in their use but also in their creation (more often recognized in non-Western circles -- i.e., Paulo Friere). Vygotsky's methodology recognizes the tool-and-result unity as a sociohistorical and cultural process (Newman & Holzman, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). Culture and history are created as human beings create new tools towards new social ends. A tool-and-result methodological approach to evaluation, then, positions the result as the ongoing creation of tools, as the creation of culture and history, as new relational activity. Whereas most evaluations are conducted in hope that the findings can be used at some later time to help improve programs (tool-for-result), here the findings are in the ongoing creation of tools (tool-and-result) hence the ongoing improvement of the program. That is, continuously creating new methods presumes an ongoing cycle of reflection and action; a new method or tool is created when one deems prior methods unsatisfactory or when new goals arise without the means to achieve them. In the present case, the assessment tool was continuously constructed in order to document practice/history *and* build an ongoing process where all young people could participate in community development and gardening/make history. The following section describes the practice of this tool-and-result methodology.

The practice of tool-and-result methodology

The project began in the fall of 1998 and occurred in collaboration with an after-school program operating out of a temporary housing shelter in an urban, northeastern section of the United States. Over a nine-month period, at least forty homeless children and teenagers were involved in the program and approximately fifteen were core participants, or attended sessions regularly. The core members were teenagers; younger children, however, often participated in many project activities. The overall goal of REAL, Restoring Environments And Landscapes, (the teens' self-identified name for the project) was for young people to design and carry out a plan for transforming an abandoned lot across the street from the shelter into a usable space for the community. REAL, its mission, and its methods emerged gradually, simultaneously and were

created in relation to the specific needs, interests and lived experiences of this particular grouping of homeless teenagers. In what follows, four overlapping aspects of this tool-and-result methodology are highlighted: 1) the methodology emerged in practice; 2) the methodology supported new relational activity; 3) the value of the methodology was not known in advance; and 4) all of the above facets allow this story to be told.

I. The methodology emerged in practice.

The methods (both pedagogical and evaluative) were not created beforehand and then put into practice; method emerged in practice. As Holzman (1997) describes it, "practicing method is an explicitly participatory activity that entails the continuous, self-conscious deconstruction of the hierarchical arrangements of learning, teaching, and knowing" (p. 11). While I began with the broad goal of involving young people in a community-based action project, I did not know in advance how we would achieve this goal and held few preconceived notions of what was important to learn and demonstrate. I was, however, interested in building a participatory practice where young people could develop as leaders, activists, and creators of their learning environment. With no predetermined curriculum, the members of REAL participated in a variety of activities that emerged as the overall project and goals developed. Over the course of nine months, they took on roles as urban planners, designers, researchers, activists, scientists, mathematicians, photographers, journalists, gardeners, and so on. While I had been keeping a collection of our work (photos, drawings, etc.), I formally introduced the idea of tracking "some of the things we do together" in the second month. The young people suggested keeping a photo album, making a timeline, making lesson plans "like school," and having rotating members "jot down some things" at the end of a meeting or session.

The methodology emerged from these discussions and from questions that were beginning to form. One question that I often grappled with was 'How can we expect the young people to think about and plan for transforming the lot when they know they will be leaving?' I began to critically examine my understanding of the connection between program activities and evaluation. Creating measures that did not also advance the group and our activities together seemed, to me, to be a fruitless endeavor (a tool-for-result approach). In a tool-and-result approach neither could be anticipated and neither could be contextually abstract. In this context, I wondered what would help the group develop so that exiting was not another ending in their

lives or in the continuation of the project. When one boy asked a guest speaker "how long these projects take?" and learned that fully developing the garden could take up to one to two years, he said, "I won't be here that long." This provided an occasion to discuss the idea of being Founders of a project. From there the group began taking responsibility and being accountable to their roles as Founders; they had a mission to leave behind their legacy. Some took attendance; some took notes during presentations; some put photographs and other artifacts in the book. Each week "artifacts" that emerged from program activities were added to a three-ring binder. "The book," as the young people referred to it, helped transform endings. People could see where they left in the process knowing they would always be a part of what was created. In essence, they were the founders of REAL and we were writing our history. The book includes actual products (letters, notes, flyers, drawings, etc.), visual representations (photographs), direct inquiries (obtained through surveys, written evaluations/reflections, concept maps), an attendance log and summary of activities (or "lesson plans").

II. The methodology supported new relational activity.

The flexibility of the program, as well as, the transience of homeless youth meant that kids appeared, disappeared, and re-appeared. Participants were not systematically involved in the same process (rendering a systematic assessment of what was learned impossible, or at least unfair). Instead of the constant flux of entering and exiting being problematic, I was interested in figuring out how to see/act upon it as an asset. In fact, it was this characteristic of the community that was the impetus to the tool-and-result form the assessment took. That is, the assessment tool was continuously constructed in order to document history *and* make history. Documenting the process by which we progressed as a group, and the things we accomplished and learned along the way, was a methodology that allowed young people to enter and exit without 'missing out' or having to play 'catch up.' New participants could enter the group and enter history / help make history. Veteran participants could exit and continue to be a part of the history that was made. In creating a process where the young people could enter and exit, they were not excluded from participating, from making history. Conversely, when learning is limited to the appropriation of cultural tools being absent results in being left behind and left out. That is, it is often presumed that children learn culture by participating gradually in sociocultural activities. Through this Western lens, learning is also linear and sequential, and missing "prerequisite" knowledge dooms

the child to failure. Given the vulnerability of homeless youth as having little to take forward and little to leave behind I was interested in figuring out a way that leaving did not mean leaving without. Had we focused on particular individualistic and mentalistic objectives (e.g., learning about plant growth) I suspect this would have been likely. Even if they left with an understanding of plant growth they would not have left with the experience of having been a part of producing history.

III. The value of the methodology was not known in advance.

Most evaluations are conducted under the premise that the findings will help improve programs or at least one's understanding of the entity that was evaluated. The evaluation tools are expected to yield results whose value is in their usefulness to the practitioner. Here, the value of the methodology was evidenced not only in the usefulness of its findings (i.e., the content of the book and its interpretation) but also in the utilization of the tool itself. The book does not tell a story from the vantagepoint of having discovered some truths about urban homeless children or from the perspective of having found the "right" pedagogical position from which to teach and interact with homeless children. In the simultaneous development of practice and assessment, a methodology emerged in relation to the specific interests, concerns, relationships, and practices of a particular grouping of people. Activities emerged and were situated in the dialectic of continuity and flux. The nature of homelessness and transience meant the constant need to create anew. It meant products were in constant tension with the need to continuously re-create a process where anyone could enter/participate.

The book was an organizational tool for documenting the progress and process of the work. To me, its value was that it created continuity in an environment of flux. The documentation of our history served as both an artifact to leave behind and memorabilia to take forward. However, its value to the group re-emerged in different and unpredictable forms. It served as a catalyst for dialogue about the project both within the group and outside of it; it was a mechanism for getting feedback and suggestions from participants and community members; and participants used it to represent with pride their collective achievement. The book was public and visible. It was accessible to all members of the community, including parents, who often were pleased to see their child's achievements. It came with us on trips, on the subway; it was on

display during community events. The "artifacts" that it contained represent the cultural community of REAL and the book allowed the creation of culture to be documented historically.

IV. All of the above facets allow this story to be told.

There would be no story to tell, no outcomes, if the tool we created wasn't a part of this result. Having said that, our book tells the story of a group of young people who created "something out of nothing," as an after-school staff member put it. The following is an abbreviated account of REAL's history from which I hope to illustrate the *data collection* process. Here, the data did not result from separate assessment tools but were artifacts from actual project activities. Below I make explicit reference to the artifacts that were entered into the book; because this is an abbreviated account, there are omissions.

The emergence of REAL and its mission began with a question I posed to the teenagers, "What are the concerns of young people today?" The teenagers spoke of teen pregnancy, being shot or "making it to the next day," AIDS, unprotected sex, gangs, and drinking alcohol and created a collective collage reflecting their concerns. (**Artifact: photo of collage**.) Conversations began about violence, and adult's negative perceptions of youth, "especially if you're black." One boy handed me the cover story from a Time magazine entitled, *So young to kill, so young to die,* saying, "This is our message." (**Artifact: cover story**.) There was a basis for suggesting that we change those perceptions, that we engage in building something positive where adults could see young people, especially young people of color, as productive and caring individuals. Ideas began to form. Discussing the resources we had available, we formed our mission - to transform an empty lot across the street from the shelter into a usable community space. What would define "usable space?" This was first explored as the young people constructed a list of 16 possibilities for the lot including -- a basketball court, archery range, playground, garden, and stage (**Artifact: typed list**).

Our mission was taking form, as was the identity of the group. In brainstorming a name for our group, the humanistic aspect of our project became apparent. The focus was not solely on changing the physical structure of the lot but on "helping" and "caring." I asked the young people, What words come to mind when you think about who we are and what we do together? The words generated were: Designer, Activity, Community, Gardener, Service, Caring, Caring Squad, Helping Hands, Leaders, and Environmental (**Artifact: Notes from session**). As we

played with words, REAL or Realizing Environmental Architecture League was born (later changed to Restoring Environments And Landscapes). This was a drastic change to an earlier name "Shelter Boys." In the documentation of our collective history, through conversations as well as actual artifacts, one gets a glimpse of a new sociology in the making. Identities were transforming from "shelter boys" to a caring squad of environmental architects and leaders.

With 16 possible ideas, the next step was to conduct a site assessment to determine which of these ideas was most feasible. Four teams studied the empty lot on the corner. The young people measured the lot determining its perimeter and area, took pictures to document its current use, recorded a detailed list of the objects that existed in the lot (living and nonliving), and drew pictures that captured the current state of the environment. The teams produced a full report of their findings. **(Artifact: Site assessment report)**. The site assessment led to decisions about feasible design possibilities. For instance, a basketball court was crossed off the list because the lot was too small **(Artifact: Revised list, including reasons for exclusion)**. Seven possibilities remained, all of which could be included in one design plan: playground, garden, club house, penny store, jungle gym, sandbox, and a stage.

During the winter months, REAL began to design the space discussing the types of activities that the design would promote. The initial designs included chess tables, swings, benches, flowers and trees, blueberry bushes, and a stage for cultural shows **(Artifact: conceptual drawings)**. These new designs illustrated a qualitative shift in teen's thinking from the modern entertainment of cyber space games and sporting events to a design that promoted interaction among all age groups and that beautified the community. In addition to knowing *what* would be in the garden, we had to decide on the configuration of the landscape. A three-dimensional model was built and later served as a mechanism for sharing the plan with the broader community **(Artifact: photos of model)**. Over time changes in the design were evident. Quantitatively, the number of structures included in the plan increased steadily. Qualitatively, the design plan showed how ideas continued to emerge as they spoke with various professionals, visited local gardens, and gathered pictures of other community gardens. Structures, such as a trellis, were unknown and hence unimaginable beforehand **(Artifact: chart showing changes in design concepts over time)**.

With the design in place and the warm weather upon us, it was time to make the garden a reality. The plan was to organize a Community Day inviting volunteers to help clear the garbage

and debris, fix the fence, and paint and post signs. Several teens and adults worked on committees organizing refreshments, or a welcoming table where volunteers could sign in. The model and the book were displayed at the welcoming table. Community Day brought out 40 to 50 people who worked to achieve the goals for the day. They raked and picked up the garbage. Loaded a cooperative sanitation truck with as much debris as possible. The old fence was torn down and the area was cleared for the new fence. A team of adults and kids, with the assistance of a professional carpenter, dug holes to place the new fence posts, cut the wood to the proper size creating sturdy structures, and cemented the posts into place. Signs were painted with the message: "Help keep our REAL garden clean." The objectives for the day were achieved with great success. And, so much more occurred! A group of young people from the neighborhood made a pond "from natural resources." The trees and existing flowers were watered. A DJ set up his equipment so people could work to music. The younger children got their faces painted and we barbecued hamburgers and chicken. Some people just came to hang out. The local news covered the event and several participants were interviewed. Others were video-interviewed by some of the REAL members "covering the event." The sentiment voiced by many of the people interviewed was one of beauty, fun, pride, celebration, cooperation, family, community, and love. As many suggested, the community garden creates a positive influence in a city marked by violence. It is an alternative to the streets. It is a place where children and adults can play and work together. (**Artifacts: photos from community day, sign in sheet, transcribed interviews**.) These are some of the "outcomes" that the book documents; results that others involved in children's gardening have suggested occur (Feenstra, McGrew, & Campbell, 1999).

Creating a qualitatively different learning environment

As adults and young people co-create tools what results is a qualitatively different learning environment (Fusco, 1998; Higgins, Harris, & Kuehn, 1994; Kamen, 1996). In the co-development of tools or 'practice of method', new relational activity is created; adults and young people begin to do different things together. As adults are inviting of youths' input, young people can take part in creating their own learning environments. As the learning environment becomes less rigidified, adults have the opportunity to recognize the multiplicity of perspectives, lived experiences, emotions, and strengths of young people. Research in the area of assessment, for instance, has shown that when students share responsibility for demonstrating what they know

and how to show it, practitioners begin to recognize them as more capable and having strengths that before went unnoticed (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992; Kamen, 1996). In the above example, the young people were able to exhibit, utilize, and develop strengths as they participated in planning and designing a community development and gardening project, and documenting their collective history. They did not participate in the discursive and material practices of a single domain but helped to create an interdisciplinary, multifaceted and dynamic environment for learning and development. In their roles as urban planners, activists, journalists, and so on, they created a qualitatively new learning environment. As kids walked around during community day with a video camera and microphone in hand, they were not in the process of learning how to be journalists; they were journalists. In fact, their interview questions were comparable, if not better, than those asked by the "professional" local newscaster. By allowing kids to muck around with methods (create tools) they develop not by slowly appropriating cultural and historical tools but by creating culture and history. It is from this perspective that I advocate for designing evaluation practices which simultaneously build new human activity and new environments for learning and development.

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